

DERBY DOWNS

Airport Park between George Washington Boulevard and Derby  
Downs Drive  
Akron  
Summit County  
Ohio

HALS OH-5

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### DERBY DOWNS

HALS NO. OH-05

- Location: Airport Park between George Washington Boulevard and Derby Downs Drive, Akron, Summit County, Ohio  
Latitude: 41.03910 Longitude: -81.46043
- Significance: Derby Downs is a soap box derby track constructed by the WPA. Boys have “gravity raced” annually at Derby Downs for the national championship since 1936, except for a four-year hiatus during World War II. Girls have raced with the boys since 1971. Children from Canada, Germany, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Panama, the Philippines, and South Africa have also competed in the championship.
- Description: Derby Downs is a 1600-foot, three-lane, straight, downhill, paved track on a hill in southeastern Akron, adjacent to the Rubber Bowl and Akron Fulton Airport. Each lane is 10-feet wide. Originally paved with concrete, the track is now surfaced with asphalt. Initially, the starting line was 1175 feet from the finish line. To keep speeds under a safe limit, the course was shortened to 975.4 feet in 1941, and to 953.75 feet in 1971. “Topside”—the area at the top of the track where the cars are stored—is off George Washington Boulevard. The finish line is off Derby Downs Drive.
- History: Derby Downs was created due to the vision of two men: Myron E. “Scottie” Scott (1907-1998) and Bain E. “Shorty” Fulton (1892-1979).

Myron E. “Scottie” Scott was an artist and photographer with the *Dayton Daily News*. In June 1933, the sight of boys racing home-built, gravity-powered cars down Big Hill Road in Oakwood, Ohio gave him the idea of promoting a “soap box derby.” Three hundred and sixty-two children showed up with cars made from recycled materials for the derby on August 19, 1933. This led Scott to promote a national competition. Children competed in newspaper-sponsored races in thirty-four cities to qualify for the All-American Race, which was held in 1934 at Burkhardt Hill in Dayton, Ohio. Chevrolet sponsored the 1934 race, and continued to do so until 1972. The City of Akron, the Akron Beacon Journal, and Akron-based businesses Firestone Tire & Rubber, Goodyear Tire & Rubber, B.F. Goodrich, and General Tire & Rubber persuaded Chevrolet to move the national competition to Akron, Ohio. Fifty-two cities held qualifying races for the 1935 All-American Soap Box Derby at Tallmadge Hill in Akron. During the 1935 race, one of the race cars struck nationally-known sportscasters Graham McNamee (1888-1942) and Tom Manning (1899-1969). Their injuries were minor, but the resultant publicity made the derby a nationally recognized sporting event. One hundred and seventeen cities held qualifying races for the

1936 national competition at Derby Downs in Akron, which was also the year that Chevrolet started the tradition of awarding a college scholarship to the winner.

Bain E. "Shorty" Fulton bought a farm in Akron in 1924. He cleared the pasture and orchard and opened an airport (now known as the Akron Fulton Airport). Fulton envisioned a winter sports facility on the hill beside his airport, and accomplished this through New Deal-era relief programs. In 1934, the Civil Works Administration built a stone shelter house (then nicknamed Shorty's Mansion, now known as Heisman Lodge) and excavated the eastern side of the hill for an amphitheater (now known as the Rubber Bowl). The excavated soil was used to fill a swampy area at the airport. The National Youth Administration cleared trees and built toboggan chutes, a bobsled run, and ski runs. In 1936, Fulton modified his plans to include Derby Downs and supervised the construction of the track by the Works Progress Administration. Derby Downs was used as a sled run during winter until the sleds rails gouged the track. The Works Projects Administration constructed bleachers on both sides of the finish line in 1940. By the early 1940s, improvements at Derby Downs and the Rubber Bowl had encroached on the winter recreation area to the extent that there was not enough room to safely stop at the bottom of the hill, and the winter sports runs were dismantled. Modern additions are the 1992 All-American Soap Box Derby headquarters building below the track and the 2001 racecar storage building Topside.

Sources: Aeppel, Timothy. "The Soapbox Derby Hit the Skids. Hey, Maybe There's a Movie in That!" Wall Street Journal 28 Apr 2010:1, A14.

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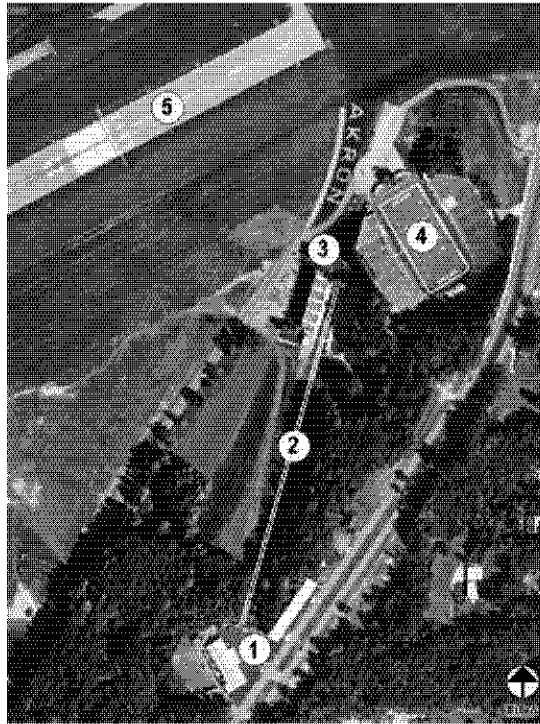
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May 6, 2010

Image:



Derby Downs in 2000

1. "Topside," the area at the top of the track where the cars are stored (off George Washington Boulevard)
2. Derby Downs Track
3. Finish-line bleachers and All-American Soap Box Derby Headquarters (off Derby Downs Drive)
4. Rubber Bowl
5. Akron Fulton Airport

Base image courtesy U. S. Geological Survey, September 29, 2000.